

LEGAL AID SOCIETY OF SAN DIEGO, INC.  
Office of the Public Attorney  
1475 Sixth Avenue, 4th Floor  
San Diego, California 92101  
Telephone: 619.262.5557  
Facsimile: 619.471.2653



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President, Board of Directors  
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GREGORY E. KNOLL, ESQ.  
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## **YOUTH OUTREACH PROJECT**

### **Legal Aid Society of San Diego, Inc. Pro Bono Program**

The plight of America's foster care youth needs no description. In late 2002, the PBS documentary "Emancipation Day" examined the lives of foster youth leaving the system, and discovered an overwhelming need for legal assistance for former foster youth. Nationwide, 40% of all foster children will become homeless within 12 months of their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday.

In San Diego, approximately 400 youth age out of the foster care system every year. As young people in a border city, San Diego's foster youth face a combination of issues when they leave foster care: lack of affordable housing, language barriers, diverse family structures and numerous obstacles to education and employment.

In response to these needs, the Legal Aid Society of San Diego, Inc. Pro Bono Program developed the Youth Outreach Project. With the generous support of Equal Justice Works, a national fellowship program, and Morrison & Foerster, LLP, this project is the first legal services program in the nation to provide direct civil legal services specifically to emancipated youth and youth aging out of foster care.

Through outreach clinics in drop-in centers and referrals, the Youth Outreach Project is now bringing legal services into the lives of this vulnerable population. The legal needs of the youth vary widely, from major housing and education issues to simple parking ticket disputes. Additionally, many youth are victims of identity theft, often perpetrated by their own biological parents. With legal assistance, many of the barriers facing these youth can be remedied.

The legal community of San Diego has rallied around this project and its clients; many attorney and non-attorney volunteers donate their services to these youth through the Legal Aid Society, Inc. Pro Bono Program. In addition, the program benefits from the in-house expertise of Legal Aid lawyers in the areas of consumer law, housing, family law, welfare, and other areas.

The success of this cutting-edge model has received national attention. The Children's Aid Society in New York City is creating a project for former foster youth based on the YOP model. Other nonprofit organizations in Los Angeles and San Francisco have also expressed interest. San Diego Lawyer Magazine published a profile of YOP in its Sep/Oct 2003 issue, and the San Diego Union Tribune published a feature on the project in December 2003. The Youth Outreach Project's creative approach to legal problem solving is enabling former foster youth to achieve their potential.

For more information, please contact Michele Benedetto, Esq., Youth Outreach Project Coordinator, at (619) 471-2606 or MicheleB@lassd.org.